



Dominguez and Escalante followed this route 199 years ago.

Mapped beauty of Utah

Famed 1776 trek covered 4 states

By Jan Padfield
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The year was 1776. Climbing a small hill, the padres viewed a shimmering lake — the mountains wrapped in autumn glory.

"This is the most beautiful valley in all of New Spain!" They recorded those words in a diary that evening, and cartographer Don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco mapped the area of Utah Valley, and of Provo Canyon where they had descended.

It was Sept. 23, and the now-famous Dominguez-Escalante expedition had just discovered Utah Lake.

Recalling the dramatic event was Msgr. Jerome Stoffel for members of the Salt Lake Valley Chapter, Utah Historical Society. Stoffel, an expert on the Dominguez-Escalante trek, is pastor of the St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Logan.

He said the famed 1776 trek lasted only four months but covered an amazing 2,000 uncharted miles in what are now four states.

Leaving Santa Fe, N.M., July 29, the party of 10 men with limited supplies searched for a route to link established Catholic missions of Mexico with those of California. They traveled into the vast unknown region north of the Gila River, and their trail parallels today's super highways in most areas.

Fathers Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante led the small group, which also searched for a legendary great river. Three Indian guides served from time to time.

Primary objective of the expedition was to open a line of communication between Spanish settlements of New Mexico and Monterey on a course that would avoid the desert regions of Arizona and the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

They went south of Durango, seeing beautiful Mancos Valley near Mesa Verde, then Cortez, Montrose, Grand Mesa, and the area west of Rifle, Colo. Near Rangley they encountered buffalo and killed one to replenish their dwindling food supply.

Crossing the Green River, they camped north of Jensen, Uintah County, Utah, to rest. Continuing through the Uintah basin near present day Myton and the Strawberry area, they rode along the Duchesne and wrote of the remains of an ancient Indian kiva. They viewed the lofty peaks of the Wasatch Range in the distance.

Meeting parties of Timpanogos Utes, they gained knowledge of northern Utah, but continued south past Nephi and Holden.

On Sept. 29 they discovered the Sevier River. On Oct. 2 they looked for water and discovered Sevier Lake; the Virgin River, Oct. 15; Glen Canyon, Oct. 26.

It was on Oct. 11, at a point about midway between present Milford and Cedar City that a severe wind and snow storm brought dissension within the group. The padres cast lots to determine whether to abandon the objective and return to Santa Fe or continue the attempt to reach California.

They returned to New Mexico via "The Crossing of the Fathers." The Indians had warned them of "the perilous ledges, the impassable canyon." But suddenly, after a tortuous journey, they were en route back to civilization, arriving in Santa Fe Jan. 2, 1777.

The expedition had completed one of the most remarkable explorations in the history of the West. The Escalante Journal is the earliest eye-witness description of a major portion of what became Utah.

The narrative of this exploration, accompanied by color slide photographs, was the result of more than 30 years study by Msgr. Stoffel, author and historian who has traveled the route often.

The expedition of Fathers Dominguez and Escalante will be a prominent feature of the nation's bicentennial celebration. It is of particular significance, since the decision to make the trek was made July 4, 1776, the same date history was made in Philadelphia, Msgr. Stoffel noted.